

SET PIECE: SANDRA MUJINGA AT THE APPROACH

By [Gilda Williams](#)  May 14, 2021 1:34pm



View of the exhibition "Spectral Keepers," 2021, showing *Mísató*, 2020; *Mítáno*, 2020; *Minei*, 2020; and *Mibalé*, 2020. © The artist. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London.



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A green room is where performers stand by before going onstage: an in-between room, a place to wait before the action begins. [Sandra Mujinga](#)'s exhibition "Spectral Keepers" is a green room too, drenched in acid-green light. Four towering skeletal figures occupy the floor, decked in elaborate hooded coveralls fashioned from a light netted fabric of the same lime green. Each is paired with a mysterious, empty, cone-shaped basket that sits at the figure's feet on the floor. Mujinga's giant keepers stand nine feet high, with sloping shoulders melding into long boneless arms. Literally set in the limelight, "Spectral Keepers" is unapologetically theatrical.

The occupants of this green room await something—but what? Poised to watch the entrance, the ghostly foursome might be waiting for wide-eyed art lovers eager to return to galleries after London's wearying third lockdown. If so, they made a terrifying welcoming committee, silently observing visitors from inside the deep faceless shadows of their hoodies. Their uniforms and baskets hint at some kind of labor, but what is their occupation? Are they dangerous—postapocalyptic scavengers or a zombie cleanup crew—or are they benign, like emergency workers clad in full-body protective gear, turning to ask whether we require assistance? Perhaps they are prisoners fleeing the land of the dead, and green is the new orange. The exquisite detailing of their outfits, however, triggers other associations. The stylishly ruched suits trimmed with cotton ties suggest that these are severely underweight supermodels, primping before some postnuclear catwalk, or maybe just tired clubbers, making their way home in the hazy light of dawn, hooded up to conceal their bloodshot eyes. Superhuman in height and perfectly camouflaged in their surroundings, they also conjure the extraterrestrial warriors that populate science fiction; Mujinga has spoken of the influence in her work of [Afrofuturism](#) and, in particular, [Octavia E. Butler](#).

We're left uncertain whether to react with fear, gratitude, curiosity, or perhaps even pity. Their sticklike armatures visible under semitransparent pant legs, the keepers stand as symbols of human fragility, like Giacometti's postwar emaciated human sculptures, now clothed in pandemic-era hazmat suits. Their spindly legs look skinned alive and yet protected beneath cascading layers of fabric.

Born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and based in Norway, Mujinga has often reflected on representations of Blackness in her art. She has previously employed green screens for their ability, the artist has said, to signify both hypervisibility and invisibility—seemingly opposing conditions that are often central to perceptions and experiences of Blackness. Her earlier exhibition “Hoarse Globules” (2018) involved similarly lanky humanoids, but in contrast, those dark figures seemed hollowed out, loose and insubstantial in rubbery robes that looked poured and syrupy. The alert stances of the keepers here emphasize that they are determinedly alive, if under threat. Their empty vessels and the dry netting could indicate a drought, while their attenuated frames hint at famine. Are they silently beseeching us to nurse them back to health?

What's extraordinary is how Mujinga has manipulated her elements to produce a succinct summation of 2020's multiple traumas. Start with the contagion-busting coveralls—like so many people enduring lockdowns, these isolated siblings are growing more and more alike, merging into their unchanging interior. The competing associations that “Spectral Keepers” evoked—are these heroes or fugitives, saints or mercenaries?—echoed this past year's haunting question



Sandra Mujinga, *Mitano*, 2020, tulle fabric, cotton fabric, nylon thread, threaded rods, wire clamps, cellular concrete, 109 ½ by 31 ½ by 15 ¾ in. © The artist. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London.
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of whether uniformed figures are rescuing angels or trained murderers. Caught mid-act in their mysterious labor, these keepers leave us in a state of permanent unease. We await their next move, just as they await ours.